

R. A. Sokolov

SCIENCE AND PSEUDO-SCIENCE IN MODERN STUDIES OF
ALEKSANDR NEVSKII

The article provides insight into debates about the life and political activities of Aleksandr Nevskii and the historical memory of him which have been going on for the last year or two. The author focuses on arguments used by the scholars in this polemic and analyzes the attempts to cast doubt on the results of research which has already been conducted. The author recognizes the necessity to take into consideration the opinions of these scholars who have suggested new interpretations of the sources on the basis of scientifically tested methodology, hence drawing conclusions about the discreditable facts in the biography of the prince and the inefficiency of his policy in general (G. Fennell, D. N. Danilevskii). However, particular emphasis is placed on the insufficient account of the existing historiographic work as well as the methodically inappropriate use (and sometimes disregard) of the above-mentioned sources. This drawback is typical of the works of the authors whose insight into the issues they study is not deep enough and who, nonetheless, are given an opportunity to express their views in leading historical periodicals. These aspects allow us to determine the development of a tendency to neglect the works of our historical forbearers — Soviet and Russian historians. As an example, the article provides the analysis of the theoretical construct A. N. Nesterenko's article, published in "Voprosy Istorii" (№ 1, 2016) and containing a number of hypotheses that remain unconfirmed by the facts to a considerable extent. The refutation of these hypotheses does not take a great deal of effort, but makes us refer once again to the analysis of the sources and to the quite voluminous literature on this subject. That is why the article provides a representative survey of the statements of the scholars who at different times touched upon some disputable issues in the frame of the topic "Aleksandr Nevskii", namely: the relations of Iaroslav Vsevolodovich with his spouse Feodosiia and father-in-law Mstislav Udaloi (the Bold), the spread of the practice of placing the minor children of the Rurik house at the prince's table, the battle on the Neva, the circumstances of the canonization of Aleksandr, the interpretation of the chronicles and hagiographical texts, the reports of Tatishchev, and the like. Refs 25.

Keywords: Aleksandr Nevskii, Iaroslav Vsevolodovich, Russian historiography, the battle on the Lipitsa, the battle on the Neva, biography of Aleksandr Nevskii, Medieval Rus'.

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НАУЧНОСТЬ И НАУКООБРАЗИЕ В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯХ
ОБ АЛЕКСАНДРЕ НЕВСКОМ

В публикации анализируются обстоятельства развернувшейся в последние год-два дискуссии относительно жизни и политической деятельности Александра Невского, а также исторической памяти о нем. Автор останавливается на характере доводов ученых, анализируются попытки поставить под сомнение результаты, полученные в ходе уже проведенных исследований; отмечается необходимость учета взглядов ученых, предложивших на основании научно выверенной методологии новое прочтение источников и на базе этого сделавших выводы о наличии в биографии князя компрометирующих фактов или контрпродуктивности его по-

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литического курса в целом (Дж. Феннел, Д. Н. Данилевский). Вместе с тем наибольший акцент сделан на недостаточном учете имеющихся в историографии наработок, а также на методически неоправданном использовании (а иногда игнорировании) источников. Данный недостаток присущ трудам, авторы которых недостаточно глубоко проникли в суть изучаемой проблемы, но все-таки получают трибуну в серьезных исторических изданиях. Все отмеченное заставляет говорить о появлении тенденции, суть которой — в пренебрежительном отношении к наработкам предшественников, советских и российских историков. Частным примером такой тенденции может служить работа А. Н. Нестеренко, опубликованная в авторитетном историческом журнале «Вопросы истории» (№ 1 за 2016 г.). Построения, содержащиеся в ней, ряд недостатков подкрепленных фактами гипотез не представляет труда опровергнуть, однако факт их появления обязывает еще раз обратиться и к анализу источников, и к весьма объемной литературе, посвященной данной проблематике. Репрезентативный обзор, осуществляемый автором, дает четкое представление о ее разработке, мнениях ученых, высказанных в разные годы по спорным вопросам в рамках темы «Александр Невский»: это взаимоотношения Ярослава Всеволодовича с супругой Феодосией и тестем Мстиславом Удалым, распространность практики посажения на княжеские столы малолетних отпрысков Рюрика Дома, Невская битва, обстоятельства канонизации Александра, трактовка летописных и житийных текстов, а также сообщений В. Н. Татищева и т. д. Библиогр. 25 назв.

Ключевые слова: Александр Невский, Ярослав Всеволодович, отечественная историография, Липицкая битва, Невская битва, Житие Александра Невского, Средневековая Русь.

Aleksandr Nevskii as a person is of special importance for our country and people. This largely explains the inexhaustible interest in him as a historical figure displayed by professional historians. It is noteworthy, that the activities of the prince are far from being always appreciated positively. Sometimes, generally accepted facts are called into question: historians attempt to take a different view of both the political realities of the 18th century and of the significance of Aleksandr Nevskii's choice of policies for the future course of the country.

This is a normal process, as the main purpose of the historical science is to look into the data, provided by the sources, to analyze the peculiarities of the development of historiography of some particular period of time and to attempt giving an adequate answer to different questions. The scholars, who can be called “skeptics” for convenience, of course, should have an opportunity to draw their own conclusions and contest the well-composed schemes of their colleagues. Their views, if scientifically grounded, should be taken into consideration, even if their opponents do not agree with them. The studies of I. N. Danilevskii [Danilevskii 2000, pp. 187, 188, 209, 220] and the recently published in the Russian language monograph of the German scholar F. B. Schenk [Schenk 2007], which despite some minor factual and methodological inaccuracies¹, were favorably received by colleagues, can be examples of this “skeptical” approach.

All this is evident, as well as the fact, that a professional scholar does not need to, and what is more, should not respond to insinuations of self-proclaimed “intellectuals” who do not possess even the basic knowledge in the field, but are eager to answer even the most subtle questions and to reconsider any fact, even those which are quite clear and allow no dubious interpretations.

However, the situation in modern historiography is favorable for sensation-hunting, which, unfortunately, sometimes can become an end in itself. This may result not only in the construction of a defamatory version of some aspects of the activities of Aleksandr Iaroslavich. Sometimes, a historian, carried away by his/her enthusiasm and eager to make

¹ For more details, see [Sokolov 2014, pp. 185–190].

a new contribution to science, does not examine the question thoroughly enough and makes disappointing mistakes. This is exactly what happened with “Aleksandr Nevskii”, the seventh volume of the series “Praviteli Rossii” (Rulers of Russia), published at the end of 2015. The author of the book obviously mixes up a son of Aleksandr and his brother, who both bore the same name Vasilii. Moreover, the patronymic of the mixed-up prince is also Iaroslavich, which does not prevent the author from calling him a son of the hero of the battle of the Neva [Volodikhin, 2015, pp. 71–72].

Of course, it is a petty detail, just an occasional carelessness of a scholar, which should not be taken very seriously. Much more disturbing is another tendency that has become quite prominent recently: people, who do not trouble themselves to study the sources properly, but at the same time are eager to quickly destroy the existing “mythologems” and to debate “metaphysical narratives” in order to create their own well-composed and clear version of the events. These also make a habit of engaging in scholarly debates and trying to express (and even dictate) their opinion. It should also be taken into consideration that professional academics are deprived of the opportunity to ignore these claims to originality as historical periodicals willingly become the forums for such “pioneers”.

For example, *Voprosy Istorii* has recently published a voluminous article by Aleksandr Nikolaevich Nesterenko, who in the first place aimed at debunking the conclusions of another author, V. V. Dolgov, whose work had appeared in the same periodical a few months earlier [Dolgov 2015, pp. 17–35]. However, the significance of this article lies not in the debate about certain issues, but in the peremptory statements and conclusions of Nesterenko, who wants to expose the allegedly “false narratives” and what is more to demonstrate how the ‘keepers of historical memory with the enthusiasm, worthy of a better cause’, try to ‘portray a mediocre representative of his time, prince Aleksandr, as a sacred symbol of the “code of civilization code” [Nesterenko 2016, p. 112]. In the introduction Nesterenko claims that ‘Russian historiography has been subject to the pressure of the centuries-old state and religious cult’ of the prince. Probably, this message explains why further in the text such concepts as ‘Russian historiography’ and ‘Soviet and Russian scholars’ are often paired with expressions as ‘irrational causes’, ‘speculative statements’ (or as a variant ‘speculative hypothesis’), ‘invalid statements’ and finally ‘false narratives’. At the same time a reasonable question arises, namely, what the basis of Nesterenko’s own conclusions is, when he confidently criticizes his opponents, who allegedly ‘adhere to some alternative paradigm’, which can be expressed by an unpretentious formula, that ‘sweet lie is better than bitter truth’ [Nesterenko 2016, pp. 103, 104, 105, 109, 112]? Considering the excellent reputation of the periodical which accepted the article for publication, this case is worth being looked into.

The author starts from afar — touching upon the father of the prince Iaroslav Vsevolodovich and calling into question the fact of the returning of Feodosiia, the prince’s wife, back to her husband after the battle on the Lipitsa in 1216. At first glance, this version doesn’t attract special attention, because it is not new for historiography and had been refuted long ago. In particular, the works of V. A. Kuchkin [Kuchkin 2010, pp. 101–103] contain important arguments, which have been actually ignored by Nesterenko. Instead, he, probably with the purpose of enhancing his own argumentation, literally interprets the record of V. N. Tatishchev, that Iaroslav treated his spouse, ‘not like a wife, but like a slave’ [Tatishchev 1995a, p. 199], hence returning to her husband meant for her the returning to servitude. It is obvious, that such a literal interpretation of Tatishchev’s record (which,

incidentally, requires a thorough verification) is arguable to say the least. It is difficult to assume, that a prince, even if he neglected his lawfully wedded wife in favor of his concubines, could have degraded her to the status of a slave. However, a tactful and accurate attitude to the sources is not typical of A. N. Nesterenko. The mixed-up bibliographical data are indicative of this: while quoting (in quite a loose way) the text of Tatishchev from the second version of *Rossiiskaia Istorii* (Russian History) (the third volume of his collected works) the author makes a reference to the fourth volume, which contains the first version of the same text [Nesterenko 2016, p. 112, annotation 7]. It should be noted, that the first version of the text, which Nesterenko erroneously refers to, contains a different variant of the words of Mstislav, addressed to his good-for-nothing son-in-law: 'Son, you may not keep any other woman near your wife, with whom you had taken vows in church and whom you should cherish. Since you have failed to do this, you do not deserve to have her' (Не годе ти, сыну, ины жены держати возле княгини, но годе княгиню чтити, яко еси ей ротился у церкви. А их не створи тако, ино не достоит ти ю имети) [Tatishchev 1995b, p. 351]. May be, this variant was rejected, as it did not fit into the article's tone of 'denunciation'?

The statement, that in 1223 Iaroslav, who took offence that his wife had been taken away from him, did not take part in the campaign against the Mongols, which was concluded by the battle on the Kalka, despite the fact that his son-in-law (it is a misprint here, the right word will be father-in-law) Mstislav the Bold urged him to do so, also seems quite dubious. Not surprisingly, the article does not mention, that this conclusion falls foul of the Lavrentievskaiia chronicle, which indeed features the mission, although not to Iaroslav, but to Iurii, and not from Mstislav, but from a group of South Russian princes. The mission resulted in the dispatch of a squad from the northeast, under the command of Vasil'ko Konstantinovich, who, however, only managed to reach Chernigov [Full collection of Russian chronicles 1997, cols. 446–447]. It should be also taken into consideration that for an 'ex-father-in-law' it would have been absurd to seek help from a 'humiliated' son-in-law.

The speculations of Nesterenko about the spouse of Iaroslav and the mother of Aleksandr Nevskii also contain conflicting data. The scholar gives a correct reference to the Novgorod First Chronicle, which features her death: "the deceased princess of Iaroslav, having taken the veil in the monastery of St. Georgii (George), was buried... on May 4... and given the name of Efrosiniia" (Приставися княгиня Ярославля у монастыри святого Георгия принявши мнишкии чин; и абие ту положена бысть..., месяца мая въ 4,... и наречено бысть имя еи Ефросинья) [Novgorod First Chronicle 1950, p. 298]². However, this text, which is quite comprehensible, has given rise to a paradoxical conclusion, which contradicts the chronicle and claims that Efrosiniia was the name given to the princess at baptism, but not the one, she obtained as a nun! Meanwhile, historiography claimed, that this name was regularly used by the female representatives of the Rurikid dynasty from the 12th to the 14th centuries, when they took the veil, and even had the status of the "specific monastic name of the family" [Litvina, Uspenskii 2006, p. 177]. As for the spouse of Iaroslav, in particular, scholars managed to distinguish between her two or even three (after taking the veil) names (Feodosiia, the name given at baptism, her princely name Rostislava, and monastic name Efrosiniia). Describing the conflicts between her

² See also [Full collection of Russian chronicles 2000, p. 129].

husband and father, the sources associate the princess with her relatives: the wife of Iaroslav and the daughter of Mstislav [Litvina, Uspenskii 2006, p. 262].

What is more, having switched over to the mother of Fedor and Aleksandr, Nesterenko comes up with claims that can hardly be associated with the academic research. Being unable to dispute the above-mentioned arguments of V.A. Kuchkin, he makes a sensational statement allegedly based (and this is another paradox) on the methodology of Vladimir Andreevich himself. According to Nesterenko, Iaroslav was not the biological father of his children. What arguments are suggested by the author?

First, Iaroslav, allegedly did not 'have any affection for his children', presumably, it was the reason why he sent the elder sons at a young age to reign in such a turbulent city as Novgorod. At the same time, the historian does not attach importance to the fact, that other princes did exactly the same thing, for example, Mikhail Chernigovskii, whose son underwent the ceremony of cutting his hair (a mark of transfer from the women's quarters to the men's quarters) in Novgorod and remained there for some time after the departure of his father [Novgorod First Chronicle 1950, p. 276] or Vsevolod Iurievich, who was born in 1213 [Full collection of Russian chronicles 1997, col. 438] and in 1222 was already [First Novgorod Chronicle 1950, p. 60] sent to the same 'turbulent' city.

Secondly, the scholar laments over the fact that the untimely deceased young Fedor was buried in Novgorod, and not in Pereiaslavl', where, according to Nesterenko, a first-born child of the prince should have been put to rest. However, it was Novgorod, where the elder son of Iaroslav Mudryi (the Wise), who reigned there, was buried. It is also important that the grave of Fedor was supposed to symbolize his father's and brother's connection to this city. Thus, his burial in Novgorod was reasonable from the political point of view. It is no coincidence that Mstislav Udaloï (the Bold) expressively emphasized his wish to be buried in St. Sophia Cathedral "near his father" [Novgorod First Chronicle 1950, p. 57]. His wish was not fulfilled though. It is also noteworthy, that the father of Mstislav Udaloï, Mstislav Khrabryi (the Brave), was buried in the side chapel of the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary [First Novgorod Chronicle 1950, pp. 36, 226]. Probably, this explains why the Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in Vladimir was chosen as a resting place of his grandson Aleksandr Nevskii.

Thirdly, A. N. Nesterenko argues, that, after the battle on the Lipitsa, Iaroslav and the daughter of Mstislav Udaloï could no longer lead the life of husband and wife, because of the marriage of Mstislav's granddaughter and the daughter of Daniil Galitskii (Daniel of Galicia) and Andrei Iaroslavich, the brother of Aleksandr Nevskii. However, even this argument, which is the only one which can be considered significant, is dubious, as in this case, according to the well-grounded statement of V.V. Dolgov, the degree of blood relationship allowed them to enter into a marriage, although it was on the "verge of not being permitted by the church" [Dolgov 2016, p. 191]. We will also add one important issue, indicated by both the pre-revolutionary historians [Golubinskii 1997, p. 54] and modern ones [Kuchkin 2010, p. 103]: the pair was wedded by metropolitan Kirill (Cyril) who may have arrived to the north of Rus' especially to perform this ceremony. Not long before that he had returned from Nicaea where he could have received the necessary permission from the patriarch.

Anyway, from Nesterenko's point of view it makes absolutely no difference whether the mother of Aleksandr Nevskii and his brothers and sisters was the daughter of Mstislav Udaloï or not, since his firm belief that Iaroslav didn't father his children makes all the

questions 'pointless'. Here other issues, ignored by Nesterenko, come to the fore: Iaroslav fathered not one or two children, but more than a dozen. Five of them were the princes, who owned the table of Vladimir (Mikhail, Aleksandr, Andrei, Iaroslav, Vasili, and their descent has never been called in question by other scholars. However, all these arguments can be easily stigmatized as 'sweet lies' and an 'alternative paradigm'.

Meanwhile, the author, having debunked both Iaroslav and his spouse, attacks Aleksandr as well. One of the allegations of the article is the unimportance of the battle on the Neva. This assumption is not new to historiography, and the arguments, adduced to support it [Fennell 1989, pp. 143–144], were much more cogent (although still debatable) than those, suggested by Nesterenko. The latter focuses on the fact that the records, which feature the battle in the Novgorod First Chronicle, were actually written in the 14th century. According to the author, who refers to John Lind, this is the cause of the allegedly erroneous record of the involvement of the Norwegians ("murmans") in the battle. However, Lind was, first, not the only scholar who had doubts about the participation of the Norwegians³, and, secondly, after the release of Lind's article, historiography provided a coherent and well-grounded explanation for this fact [Kuchkin 1996, p. 26].

Recopying the Novgorod First Chronicle's records from 1234 in the 14th century was common medieval practice. *Povest' vremenykh let* (Tale of Bygone Years), composed, as we know, in the second decade of the 12th century on the basis of the records of the previous century and available in the later sources (Lavrentievskaya Chronicle of 1337), can serve as proof of that.

A. N. Nesterenko vehemently disproves "another myth" about the participation of jarl Birger in the battle on the Neva, alluding to such a 'reliable' source as the Swedish-language Wikipedia! We will not bother to refute it, but have to point out the author's insufficient familiarity with historiography of this question. Long ago this was investigated by I. P. Shaskol'skii, who, without access to Wikipedia, explained, why the name of Birger had been erroneously recorded in the later sources [Shaskol'skii 1992, p. 140]. For justice's sake, we should mention that this issue hasn't been dismissed once and for all, as there is indirect evidence that the wound (seal) on Birger's face could have been inflicted with the spear of Aleksandr Nevskii, namely, the characteristic injuries on the commander's skull [Dolgov 2016, pp. 197–198].

Nesterenko is also skeptical about the Tale of the Life of Aleksandr Nevskii. In a peremptory tone he puts a question point-blank: 'What is the source of the information about the time of the composition of the Tale of the Life and why is it attributed to some "contemporary of Aleksandr Nevskii" without searching for proper evidence?' Meanwhile the results of the long-term research of Iu. K. Begunov, who made the conclusion that the Tale of the Life had been compiled in the 1280s [Begunov 1995, p. 44] by a younger contemporary of the prince; as well as the arguments of V. A. Kuchkin, who claimed that the text was composed earlier [Kuchkin 1990, pp. 36–39] are being ignored. We can only lament that without the knowledge of these authors' works it is really impossible to define 'how and when' this monument of the Russian written language occurred.

All this does not prevent Nesterenko from coming up with his own version. From his point of view, the Tale of the Life of Aleksandr Nevskii was composed in 1380 just after his canonization. Allegedly, it could not have happened before that, since the hagiographic

³ See more on this issue in: [Krivosheev, Sokolov 2009, pp. 73–74].

description of the life of a saint cannot occur before his official canonization. At that time, the text was included in the Lavrentievskaja Chronicle which, according to Nesterenko, was “composed approximately at that time” [Nesterenko 2016, p. 107, 113, annotation 35]. Once again the author walks in to the trap of his own insufficient knowledge of the subject.

To begin with, Lavrentievskaja Chronicle appeared not after, but before 1380 (in 1377). Moreover, the works of E. E. Golubinskii, written in the 19th century, give an accurate, detailed account of the canonization process in Rus', and explain why it is appropriate to believe that “his [Alexander's] worship started from the very minute of his... burial” [Golubinskii 1998, p. 65]. It would have also been useful for the author to take in to consideration the data collected by Golubinskii which could have helped him to avoid the incorrect assertion (disseminated by the atheists of the 1920s) of the necessity of the uncovering the relics of saints as an indispensable condition of their veneration as well as of the urgent insistence that the relics should be incorruptible [Golubinskii 1998, p. 42].

It should also be mentioned, that exploiting the poor state of the preservation of the relics (which is a well-known fact [Begunov, Sapunov 1995, pp. 86–87]), A. N. Nesterenko makes a peremptory statement, that the relics do not exist at all, referring to the ‘activities’ of the so-called renovationist Local Council of 1923. According to the author, the different colour of the bones, recorded during the official procedure of the uncovering of the relics in 1922 (Nesterenko has mixed up the date, indicating 1919), allegedly confirms the fact that the remains were taken from different people. It comes as no surprise, that the recently discovered data about the secret uncovering of the relics in 1917, initiated by the church hierarchs, has been dismissed by Nesterenko as well [Diary, pp. 394–399]⁴.

Summing up all the above-mentioned arguments, it can be stated that the offhand attempt to quickly destroy all the “false narratives” offhand has obviously failed. This is an expected result of the investigation, which was not backed by the analysis of the sources and historiography (which is similarly important). One of the most disturbing factors is the tendency of scholars to use the methods, which previously were denounced as inappropriate for an academic, for example, radical and at the same time arbitrary hypotheses (like the one about the biological paternity of Iaroslav Vsevolodovich) or the references to such sources as Wikipedia (even to its western version). Even more alarming is the tendency to disregard the works of predecessors, who represent the historiographic patrimony of our country, a tendency which is gradually gaining ground. In the studies of some modern researchers these works are either stigmatized as ‘false narratives’ or just ignored if they are at variance with their preconceived conclusions. Thus, even despite A. N. Nesterenko's academic groundlessness in his arguments — obvious even during a cursory acquaintance with the text, the cause for concern still remains as this work has been published by the oldest (it has existed for decades) and, undoubtedly, most authoritative journal of our country. We can only guess whether the above-mentioned negative tendency will become a decisive factor, influencing the future of Russian historical science.

⁴ These materials were introduced by E. K. Spiridonova, who also provides a detailed insight into the Soviet news-papers' publications about the uncovering of the relics in 1922. [Spiridonova 2014, pp. 155–159].

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